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ABSTRACT

Teachers of composition have an obligation to students to know what assumptions underlie their teaching methodology. Every writing course, no matter what its format, represents a particular construct of reality, of seeing the world and the individual in the world, which, in addition to writing skills, is passed on to students. Several useful studies which classify the dominant theoretical approaches synchronically have led to a better understanding of teaching methods. Yet, there is much to be gained by a diachronic and contextual examination. There is also a need to evaluate what in teaching methodology is particularly cultural. For example, James Berlin's diachronic study of nineteenth century American rhetoric has shown how common sense Realism--its compatibility with economic expansion and pragmatism--defines a particularly American tradition in rhetoric. There is another distinctly American tradition, however, a cultural proclivity to "create a world elsewhere," which Richard Poirier identifies in several major American writers and which has also had a significant role in the ideology underlying many composition courses. Examining Ralph Waldo Emerson's rhetoric for a gravitation toward visionary landscapes--his appropriation of time and space--further demonstrates how this proclivity has persisted outside the Romantic tradition. This predilection for visionary landscapes translates into the dominant theoretical positions in composition--into new rhetorical modes of invention which resist social dialogue more than they encourage it, into the boundaries placed on peer response, and into students' attitudes toward writing and creating a world in a text which resists societal intrusion. (Fifteen notes are attached.) (RAE)

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Abstract

Creating "A World Elsewhere": The Self Resisting Society
A Cultural Perspective

As teachers of composition, we have an obligation to our students to know what assumptions underlie our teaching, for our choices represent a particular construct of reality, which in addition to writing skills, we are passing on to our students. Often it is hard for us to get outside of our teaching to identify these assumptions. Fortunately, we have had several useful studies which in classifying the dominant theoretical approaches synchronically have given us a better understanding of our methods.

Yet, a synchronic approach, as useful as it may be, is not enough: there is much to be gained by a diachronic and contextual examination. For example, James Berlin's diachronic study of nineteenth century American rhetoric has shown how Common Sense Realism--its compatibility with economic expansion and pragmatism--defines a particularly American tradition in rhetoric. There is another tradition, though, which although rooted in American Transcendentalism, is distinct from the much discussed Romantic aspects of the Expressive approach and distinct from Berlin's rhetorical discussion of Emerson. This tradition, not located just in Romanticism, is a cultural proclivity to "create a world elsewhere," in Richard Poirier's words, to "take possession of a visionary landscape" which is distinctly American.

In my paper, I plan first to examine Emerson's rhetoric for a gravitation toward visionary landscapes--his appropriation of time and space. I will demonstrate further how this proclivity has persisted outside the Romantic tradition, even into supposedly antithetical movements like late nineteenth century Realism.

Secondly. I will examine how this predilection for visionary landscapes translates into the dominant theoretical positions in composition--into new rhetorical modes of invention which resist social dialogue more than they encourage it, into the boundaries placed on peer response. And finally I will examine how this affects students attitudes toward writing, how it fosters creating a world in a text which resists societal intrusion.

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Creating "A World Elsewhere": The Individual Resisting Society

A Cultural Perspective

As Sacvan Bercovitch claims "rhetoric functions within a culture. It reflects and affects a set of particular psychic, social, and historical needs."1 So do our methods of teaching writing. Every writing course no matter what its format is a means of constructing reality, of seeing the world and ourselves in the world. Fortunately, we already have several useful synchronic studies that in classifying the dominant theoretical approaches, have given us a better understanding of our methods and their implications. We also have James Berlin's diachronic study of nineteenth century American rhetoric which traces the popularity of the Common Sense rhetoric to its compatibility with economic expansionism and industrial pragmatism. But, what is missing from these fruitful studies is a closer look at how cultural forces shape our teaching of writing. I would like to suggest that the cultural proclivity to "create a world elsewhere" which Richard Poirier identifies in several major American writers has also had a significant role in the ideology underlying many composition courses.

Culture and rhetoric are at least on some levels are inseparable. Our rhetorical traditions help fashion the response to public crisis and help to shape the construction of our history. It is the

exceptional political speech which does not echo what Bercovitch identifies as the "American jeremiad"--the lament over current socio-economic problems coupled with concept of the "errand" whose fulfillment promises more prosperous times. A mutated version of this I think has emerged in the "errand" to purify public institutions of tobacco smoke while hydrocarbons, hydrofluorocarbons, sulfurs and what-not continue to proliferate atmosphere almost unnoticed. In Richard Poirier's A World Elsewhere the "errand" can be interpreted as language and the promise as "the world elsewhere," the taking "possession of a visionary landscape."[2] Such rhetorics, as Bercovitch and others have argued, influence how the mind constructs the external world. And if language is this prime shaping force, how does American culture in particular become intertwined in this formation. What in other words in our teaching pedagogy might be considered particularly American?

"Particularly American" clearly has multiple interpretations and some cultural links with rhetorical theory have already been made. I. Hashimoto in his article "Voice as Juice" connects the emphasis on voice in many writing programs to the evangelical tradition in America. Within his diachronic analysis in Writing Instruction in Nineteenth Century American Colleges, James Berlin identifies traditional rhetoric with the practical tradition in American culture. Its mechanistic and managerial methods of invention, he tells us, demands exclusion of those issues which are not empirically or rationally verifiable, which in the end encourages "a mode of behavior that helps students in their move up the corporate ladder"--i.e. the emphasis on correctness in usage, grammar and the cultivation of a sterile objectivity and

disinterestedness."3 What interests me here is how the rhetoric of liberation or escape which Poirier identifies in American writers has worked itself into rhetorical theory, specifically the Expressive school, although by no means isolated to it.)

Poirier suggests that a great portion of American writers engage in a "style of defiance," that they "resist within their pages the forces of environment that otherwise dominate in the world." Think for a moment back to Huckleberry Finn. What do you remember? Most probably, as Poirier suggests, you remember the scenes on the raft even though this accounts for less than one-tenth of the book? It is as if "only language can create a liberated place" (p. 5). This impulse can be traced back to our country's earliest history--to the anti-nominalism of Puritan rhetoric for example in which the inner voice, not previous traditions or the mediations of the church, defined the American religious venture. The religious immigrations to this country, most specifically the Calvinstic immigrations, driven by a salvationistic errand, positioned the believer in a kind of "cultural no-man's land" where individual belief/vision took priority over and often challenged social and cultural norms.[4] This impulse to "create a world elsewhere," though, as Poirier notes, is particularly evident in Emerson as it is Emerson's phrase "build therefore your own world" on which Poirier builds his argument.

James Berlin's identifies Emerson's rhetoric as social and democratic. Undoubtedly there is a strain in Emerson which is clearly social, but there is also the Emerson who is private, who claims "every spirit builds a house, a world, and beyond its world a heaven."[5] I am privileging Poirier's construction of Emerson as private not because I

see it as more important or more convincing, but because it is the Emerson most likely to be remembered, and how we remember history or historical figures in turn mirrors our own cultural constructs.

Emerson's epistemology, on which Poirier bases his argument, is first of all, at least ostensibly private. For Emerson, the individual in Poirier's words takes "visionary possession of the landscape." The eyeball is the "best composer"; it can make even a corpse beautiful.(SW, 9). The individual, in other words, makes "things in nature" conform to the axis of his or her thoughts (SW, 30). The transformation is private and inviolable. Ultimately, it is an act of appropriation in which this private construction becomes the inviolable reality.

If we look at the strategies for invention associated with the romantic approach, with such theorists as William Coles, Ken Macrorie, Stephen Judy, James Miller, James Moffett, and Peter Elbow I think we can see a parallel transaction. The writer by writing first thoughts, making metaphors, exploring imagined dialogues, telling stories, etc. takes possession of a kind of visionary landscape. A bit like the institutional discourse of confession, through the act of telling, the writer enters into a landscape of private pleasure--into a discourse of truth-telling as the writer knows it in which he or she becomes in Foucault's words captivated in the "pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it," fascinated by the "seeing it and telling it," captivated by luring others into it.6 More than this, this act of telling often provides a means for transforming the experience itself--a means for accommodating the language of the experience to the desire or desires of the teller, so that in the writer's own way, he or

she makes a corpse beautiful. Moreover, although not exclusively, the inventive process here is primarily private. And perhaps most writing needs to be this in its initial stages. Yet, in using these strategies, the writer if s/he chooses can remain entirely within private experience, can if so opted, simply not confront contextual or historical pressures. James Moffett in his article "Writing Inner Speech and Meditation" urges students to scan the inner landscape as means for attaining knowledge and power. The confrontations made in this process are necessarily contingent upon the boundaries of the particular inner mind. In Fred Morgan's perceptual approach quoted in Stephen and Susan Judy's An Introduction to the Teaching of Writing: Good thinking and writing cannot grow out of second-hand material, but must be firmly rooted in the ability of students to observe and interpret for themselves. . . . Students are encouraged to begin at the beginning by examining their surroundings. . . .They start with simple objects and progress toward complex ones, but without departing from first-hand observation and experience."[7] If left here, we remain within the eighteenth century taxonomical frame through which the individual mind could make sense of reality through observation and differentiation. In this kind of activity, there is no disjunction between the signifier and signified. In other words,"the eyeball {both as exterior and interior lens} is the best composer."

Beyond the Expressive methodologies, other heuristics such as the tagmemic or even stasis questions may not necessarily pull the individual writer out of his or her own private construction of an issue. These heuristics still place the self as thinker and composer in the position of center. And although not applicable to their

teaching pedagogy, Flower and Hays' protocol reflects a similar positioning.

Secondly, Emerson's epistemology furthermore actively rejects societal participation in the act of creation. To create, Emerson says, one must go away from society. The pure country life which nourishes "fit symbols" and "words of thought" is much preferable to the "artificial and curtailed life of the cities." One must disassociate oneself from society--its ethics, its creeds, its traditions. Poirier identifies this as the "American obsession with inventing an environment which permits unhampered feelings of consciousness," with the attempt to be momentarily freed from historical and social constraint. The environment created, Poirier argues, is the writer's creation of voice which encloses the world in the individual imagination. Implicit in this argument is that when the self divorces itself from society, there is a pristine self and world to be discovered, that there is a unique voice beyond the societal traditions which forms us, that there is a self beyond language. Meaning is essentially created away from and without dialogue with the rest of society.

If we look at how the composing process as it is most often viewed again I think we can find parallels, although it is more a question of emphasis since meaning is created both through solitary engagement and through dialogue with others. But as Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede point out even the "composition theorists most often associated with collaborative learning. . . .still posit the uniqueness of individual information," the solitariness of the pursuit.8 This resistance against societal participation extends to much of the work

done on voice as well. To possess real voice (which is quite often autobiographical or self-exploratory implies that there is an authentic self. Authentic writing, authentic vision: this comes rather close to Emerson's telling us that if we wish to create we must withdraw not only from society, but from the study--away from ethics, creeds, and traditions. Moreover, this writing in voice tends to take the writer back into solitary sojourns of memories, to capture up the writer (and the reader) into the jouissance of the experience. Macrorie commenting on some of the essays which emerged out of his "I search paper" claims: Whatever their weaknesses. . .these papers are alive, and they have remained in my memory since I first saw them."[9] Excitement, getting caught up in the experience of the thing either as writer or reader is what characterizes these assignments. It is an expansion of self, in Poirier's words, through which "style becomes the only authority." The writer has created a personal space, a world elsewhere and attempts to sweep the reader into that space as well. If done well enough, it is almost like being with Huck on the raft.

A third way in which Emerson's epistemology resists societal intrusion is by placing not language, but nature (and ultimately the self) as the ontological center of his system. In "Nature" Emerson specifically claims that language (as neutral and pure) is dependent on nature (SW, 17). Nature gives us language--its metaphors, images, its meanings. And further, Emerson posits that the whole of nature is a metaphor for the human mind." By one swift move, Emerson (at least in this stage of his essay) has obliterated the "Not Me" what he lists in the beginning of his essay as other men, nature and art, and his own body (all of which he subsumes under the one name "Nature") by turning

all of it into a mirror of his own mind. Emerson assumes, as Carolyn Porter indicates that embedded within the alien, is his "essential self-hood."[10] Emerson essentially denies difference, denies the dialectic by making it all a unified whole contained within the human mind. Such a denial is a co-opting of difference which obviates the possibility for social criticism and social change.

Contrary meanings are often blocked or overlooked, as the signifer/observer takes on elevated meaning in the individual consciousness. In terms of our writing classes, peer editing is often used to counter the the self as center. And in many ways, it does do this. It gives the writer signals not only about passages which do not seem felt, gaps in meaning, underlying assumptions, inconsistencies in argument. Yet, the process can subtly reinforce the personal landscape, particularly when we acknowledge that the reader determines his or her own feedback. I think there are good psychological reasons for these boundaries, yet they seem to me to be boundaries which resist (or at least control) societal intrusion.

So, if we recognize a cultural cord in our teaching of writing (particularly if our method is one of the variations of the Expressive Approach), what does this suggest? What are the effects of our inclusions and exclusions? First, the gravitation toward this visionary expansiveness, has revolutionized (for the better) many writing programs across the country, particularly if examine academic context out of which this movement arose. Psychologically, it has created an ambiance which helps students to become more comfortable and more free with their thoughts, and it often gets students to like writing (a difficult feat in itself). It has encouraged a process of

discovery which breaks rigid forms and catapults the student into a way of learning through patterns and juxtapositions which he or she might not otherwise do. And, after several decades of what James Berlin characterizes as "sterile objectivity and disinterestedness," perhaps this is enough.

And the exclusions? On a literal level, excluded most frequently are how rhetorical situations and varying audiences contribute to the invention process. As Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede point out, the Expressive approach or the inner directed approaches privilege a solitary process in writing which often runs counter to the cooperative efforts which often go into on the job writing tasks. Also excluded is the exposure to what Les Perleman identifies as strategies for uncovering the "rules which govern discourse in any particular context."[11] Practically, these are factors which most students will encounter in on-the-job writing tasks, whether they accept these conventions or whether they choose to challenge them.

On a more theoretical level, what kind of cultural behaviors is the Expressive approach conserving? If as James Berlin posits the current traditional approach encourages "a mode of behavior that helps students up the corporate ladder," what does the Expressive approach do? It might be helpful at this point to turn briefly back to Emerson in order to examine the results of his epistemology. Ostensibly, the emphasis on the act of creation/invention as private and as separate from societal influence sounds fairly anarchistic. Appearances, however, deceive. Authentic private visions for Emerson reflect the Absolute--Truth, Goodness, Beauty. Nature may be inexhaustible in her metaphors (in the number of signifieds) but Nature as text is Absolute.

"Relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet," Emerson says, "but stands in the will of God, and is free to be known to all men." (SW, 20). There is a correct interpretation. "Every object rightly seen," he continues, unlocks a new faculty of the soul." (SW, 21). And if the correct or Absolute is Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, as Emerson indicates it is, it once again denies anything which might taint this landscape. Thus, a corpse becomes beautiful and the sight of "laborers digging in a field" are disruptions; they intrude upon the appreciation of the "noble landscape." (SW, 39). Thus, visionary possession of the landscape eclipses dissonance, eclipses any "corpse" which is not compatible with the interior vision. Think for a moment how a general "era of good feeling" has persisted particularly throughout the past decade and how many "corpses" have been effaced in order to maintain this "noble landscape."

And in the classroom? There is certainly no absolute text, but the authentic inner voice--to what degree does this encourage a kind of conservatism? Does "I think" unequivocally lead to "I am?" Does I see unequivocally lead to it exists? Is this language, this labor that I perform all my own?[12] In not examining the kinds of constructs on which these systems rest, does this perpetuate the existing order as does Emerson's idealism. The eye/I reproduces only what it is technically in front of it, reproduces, in other words, oneness, sameness, and does not question the means of representation. The "eyeball is the best composer." It becomes in some ways the age old dream of symmetry, of the uncomplicated mirror. Could not then this produce in Irigaray's words, "copies of copies," copies of cultural epistemes?[13] Could it not encourage a representation of Otherness

which becomes not that of the Other but that of the self/representer? Does it encourage a positioning of self and/or of America which elides both past and present in favor of a vision which may work in spirit precisely because it can never be tested in fact.[14]

The Autonomous voice and the autonomous text can encourage quite literally ownership of the text. Might we not juxtapose autonomous voice which becomes manifest in the text with autonomous, private ownership, with an autonomous, isolationist America (look at the slogan "Buy American," the isolationist impulses which continue to recur in American politics. This all echoes what Alexis de Toqueville in the early nineteenth century saw as the threat of individualism to American democracy. He comments on the American behavior of owing no man anything and expecting nothing from anybody in return. Americans, he continues "form the habit of thinking themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. . . Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may shut himself up in the solitude of his own heart."[15]

I acknowledge that I have magnified particularly elements of the Expressive approach in order to probe the links between its methodology and what Poirier sees as cultural phenomena amongst American writers to build a world elsewhere. I obviously have glossed over the social dimension to this approach--the emphasis on groups, for example. And having used parts of this methodology myself am torn in that I do see that it helps students lose some of their inhibitions, and to in the end write better and enjoy it more. Yet, I still return to the question, to what extent does a private vision (as with Emerson) in its resistance against societal intrusion result paradoxically in a

conservative vision which reinforces the societal norm which encourages possession/appropriation of words/landscape?

To problematize this further, American rhetorical theory (at least in the past century) seems to oscillate between the desire for pragmatism and the desire for enhancing private vision and creation. These cultural impulses are moreover not isolated to the current debates in rhetorical theory. American focus on the self and on pragmatics have been the center of controversy between American and French psychoanalysts and American and French feminist critical theorists as well. Thus, I would suggest that along with evaluating our methods synchronically and diachronically, we need to evaluate what in our methodology is particularly cultural. What finally in our culture do we wish to contest and what do we wish to conserve?

Notes

[1] Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) xi.

[2] Richard Poirier, A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967) Further references will be made within the text.

[3] James Berlin, Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern University Press, 1984) 64.

[4] Bercovitch 25.

[5] Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Works of Prose and Poetry, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966) 46. I have selected Emerson's "Nature" for this discussion. Future references will be made within the text.

[6] See Michel Foucault's discussion of confession in History of Sexuality, vol. 1, trans., Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[7] Stephen N. and Susan J. Judy. An Introduction to the Teaching of Writing (New York: John Wiley & Sons), 1981) 132.

8 Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, Collaborative Writing: The Concept and Nature of Group Authorship, unpublished manuscript.

9 Ken Macrorie, Searching Writing (Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boyton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1984) 197.

[10] Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, Faulkner. (Middletown,

Conn.: Wesleyan, 1981) 38.

[11] See Les Perleman's discussion of discourse conventions in

[12] See Michel Foucault's discussion of the social aspects of of systems which are seemingly private in his Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, ed. R. D. Laing. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

[13] See Luce Irigaray's discussion of Plato's Cave in Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974).

[14] See Sacvan Bercovtich's discussion of the American jeremiad in the preface of The American Jeremiad. (Madison: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

[15] See Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence, (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 506-508.